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SIPDIS

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [SOCI](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL PARK CLOSED TO ALL BUT TOURISTS

1. (SBU) Summary. Deteriorating security conditions have all but closed Royal Bardiya National Park in western Nepal to researchers and conservationists and have disrupted some development projects. Tourists still have access to the park, but the local economy has taken a deep hit from the drastic drop-off in tourist arrivals. Nepal's army pulled back from a highway checkpoint and a sub-post; as a result, poaching, smuggling and Maoist-related movements have increased. Villagers fear both the Maoists and agents of the state, and complain that a long-standing lack of resources has been exacerbated by the worsening security climate. End Summary.

Park Closed to Researchers and Conservationists  
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2. (U) Due to security restrictions, research and conservation activities have come almost to a standstill inside Royal Bardiya National Park in western Nepal, and have been "severely curtailed" in the surrounding "buffer zones." Community development activities also been affected, and have been suspended in some areas. The security situation in the area around the park deteriorated by the day, according to a conservationist stationed there.

Few Intrepid Tourists  
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3. (U) Tourists were still permitted to enter the park with a guide, but few made the effort. Hotels have cut back on staff - the most popular guest house for foreign budget travelers now operates with a skeleton crew - or closed altogether. Locals told Poloff that the fall-off in tourism has had an impact not just on wage earners in the tourism sector, but also on agricultural workers who used to sell produce to hotels and restaurants.

Army Dug In, But Pulling Back  
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4. (SBU) At one of the points where the East-West highway crosses park lands, an army checkpoint was attacked by Maoists on February 24. No one was injured. [Note: Press reports have not mentioned this incident, but RNA officials in Bardiya confirmed it to Post.] The checkpoint, which was used to enforce the 40 kph speed limit through the park, was subsequently abandoned and had not been reopened. As a result, motorists could be seen moving well in excess of the speed limit, presenting a danger to the park's endangered animals, which include tiger, rhino and bear. Due to resource constraints, the army has also shut down a sub-post on the south side of the park. Conservation officials say that this has led to the growth of illegal timber cutting and poaching, as well as an increase in Maoist activity in the area.

Harvest of Wild Grasses Affected  
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5. (U) For security reasons, and because it is now stretched thin, the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) decided to prohibit local residents from entering the park to harvest wild grass this year. In the past, villagers have been permitted into the park during the dry season to cut the grass, which they use both for feed and as construction material. The grass becomes unmanageable if not cut. This year army personnel had to burn some of it. The burn imposed a hardship on the army, which had to dedicate resources to the operation; on the government, which missed out on revenue earned from grass-cutting fees; and on the villagers, who have to do without the grass.

Resource-Starved Villagers Fear Both Sides  
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6. (SBU) Villagers living around the national park expressed fear of both the Maoists and the government. Poverty remained endemic, and most girls have acquired only the most basic informal education. One ethnic Tharu who teaches at a public school near the park reported that his work was difficult because the government lacked the

funds to hire new teachers even though every year more and more students enrolled. The pupils' parents also lacked the funds to support their children's studies. The teacher reported - and other residents confirmed - that political problems had not flared up in the school

Comment

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17. (SBU) Community development programs that formerly benefited many villagers in Bardiya are now on hold and will not resume without improvements in the security situation. Until then, further economic and social development will be difficult at best. Moreover, the RNA pull-back - for want of the means to fight the insurgency - has jeopardized the park's wildlife and other resources, and has opened up the possibility for the Maoists to exploit them.

MALINOWSKI